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A Preliminary Examination of the Concept of Altruism as an Aim of Education

Full paper

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ABSTRACT:

Many are concerned with education's role in preparing societies to meet challenges related to globalization. Among various educational aims related to globalization is that of developing in young people a critical awareness of the lives of disadvantaged people, in their communities and across the world, to become compassionate, or socially responsible, 'global citizens'. This general interest is shared by policy makers envisioning global or twenty-first century citizenship education, as well as by philosophers of education and social justice-oriented teachers. However, the aim of such education or its most appropriate pedagogy or schooling context is not always spelled out, owing to the controversial nature of various interpretations and recommendations related to poverty and injustice today (i.e., economic redistribution versus austerity; privatisation versus socialism).

In this essay, I ask whether altruism can be usefully elaborated as an educational aim for global citizenship and social responsibility. First, I examine philosophical treatments of altruism such as by Thomas Nagel and Lawrence Blum, and consider the educational implications of significant features of a useful definition of the concept. Next, I juxtapose these views with those of Confucian and Buddhist scholars, to consider whether a universal value of altruism for contexts of west and east is plausible. Finally, I apply my conceptualization of altruism to Hong Kong curriculum, providing a concrete context for considering altruism as a useful educational aim. I end by highlighting the tension of teaching for altruism in settings (unlike Hong Kong) where moral education is contentious, while citizenship education is not.

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